

Message Text

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ACTION EA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4420

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CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

COMUSMACTHAI

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BANGKOK 24275

CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, MASS, TH

SUBJECT: CHATCHAI MOVES IN

1. OVERSIGHT OF U.S. MILITARY ACTIVITIES IN THAILAND AND THE CONDUCT OF RELATIONS WITH UNITED STATES AUTHORITIES HERE REGARDING U.S. FORCES HAVE TRADITIONALLY BEEN THE ALMOST EXCLUSIVE PRESERVE OF THE THAI MILITARY, SPECIFICALLY SUPREME COMMAND HEADQUARTERS (FORWARD) AND ITS CHIEF OF STAFF (NOW ASSISTANT SUPREME COMMANDER), GENERAL KRIANGSAK CHAMANAN. THE MILITARY HAVE JEALOUSLY FENDED OFF PERSISTENT BUT LARGELY INEFFECTUAL EFFORTS BY THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS TO MUSCLE ITS WAY INTO THE ACTION.

2. BOTH AS DEPUTY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS UNDER THE SANYA GOVERNMENTS, AND NOW AS MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IN THE KHUKRIT GOVERNMENT, MAJOR GENERAL CHATCHAI CHUNHAWAN HAS BEEN THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND MFA EFFORTS IN THIS AREA. CHATCHAI HAS HAD THE SUPPORT OF MANY OF THE BEST BRAINS AT
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MFA, YET UNDER PREVIOUS GOVERNMENTS THE MINISTRY

OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, LIKE THE CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT AS A WHOLE, HAS LACKED THE STRENGTH TO REALIZE ITS AMBITIONS. UNDETERRED BY PREVIOUS FAILURE, CHATCHAI HAS RENEWED HIS EFFORTS AND IS NOW MAKING CONSIDERABLE PROGRESS.

3. THE INITIAL TEST SEEMS TO HAVE COME AT THE VERY OUTSET OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT. EVEN BEFORE IT WAS CONFIRMED BY PARLIAMENT, THE KHUKRIT COALITION, IN ITS POLICY STATEMENT, CALLED FOR THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. FORCES WITHIN ONE YEAR (I.E. BY MARCH 1976). EFFORTS BY THE MILITARY TO FORESTALL THIS DECLARATION WERE UNSUCCESSFUL. THE THAI MILITARY CONTINUED TO EXPRESS THE PRIVATE VIEW THAT U.S. FORCES SHOULD REMAIN, BUT THIS VIEW WAS NOT TRANSLATED INTO ANY FORM OF EFFECTIVE ACTION, AND THE GOVERNMENT, LED ON THIS ISSUE BY CHATCHAI, PRESSED FORWARD WITH ITS POLICY.

4. CHATCHAI NEXT MOVED TO STRIP SUPREME COMMAND HEADQUARTERS (FORWARD) OF ITS PRIMACY IN DEALING WITH THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAILAND. CHATCHAI'S OWN MILITARY BACKGROUND AND THE FACT THAT HE IS THE BROTHER-IN-LAW OF DEFENSE MINISTER PRAMAN ARE MAJOR ASSETS TO HIM IN THIS CAMPAIGN. HE IS ALSO AIDED BY THE HEADY ATMOSPHERE OF THAILAND'S CURRENT EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. THE MILITARY, DISCREDITED IN THE EYES OF A NEWLY SELF-AWARE PUBLIC BY ASSOCIATION WITH THE THANOM-PRAPHAT GOVERNMENT AND DESIROUS OF AVOIDING A CONFRONTATION WITH THE CIVILIAN LEADERSHIP, HAVE MOVED INTO THE SHADOWS AND YIELDED TO THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (NOT TO MENTION THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE, THE LABOR DEPARTMENT, ETC.) AUTHORITY OVER MATTERS INVOLVING U.S. FORCES THAT WOULD PREVIOUSLY HAVE BEEN QUIETLY DISPOSED OF BY THE MILITARY THEMSELVES.

5. A KIND OF WATERSHED MIGHT HAVE BEEN REACHED DURING THE RECENT MILITARY PROMOTIONS AND REASSIGNMENTS. GENERAL KRIANGSAK, LONG AN AUTOCRAT IN MATTERS INVOLVING U.S. FORCES, WAS EVIDENTLY KICKED UPSTAIRS. CONTRARY
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TO OUR EARLIER EXPECTATIONS, HE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN SUPPLANTED IN HIS ROLE AS KINGPIN BY HIS FORMER DEPUTY, GENERAL CHAROEN PONGPANICH, WHO SUCCEEDED HIM AS CHIEF OF STAFF, SUPREME COMMAND. IT WAS CHAROEN WHO CHAIRED THE NOVEMBER 14 MEETING OF THE THAI-U.S. COORDINATING COMMITTEE TO CONSULT ON THE CLOSURE OF UDORN, AND THAI-SPEAKING AMERICAN OFFICIALS PRESENT AT THE MEETING OVERHEARD CHAROEN

AND HIS NEW DEPUTY, GENERAL THUANTHONG SUVANADAT (A KRIANGSAK PROTEGE) TALKING ABOUT HOW MUCH MORE PAINFUL THE MEETING WOULD HAVE BEEN IF KRIANGSAK HAD BEEN PRESENT. (KRIANGSAK TENDED TO PROLONG SIMILAR MEETINGS IN THE PAST BY NITPICKING AND DIGRESSING.) IT IS NOT YET CLEAR WHAT DUTIES, IF ANY, WILL ATTACH TO KRIANGSAK'S NEW JOB. FOR THE MOMENT, HE IS ALMOST UNOCCUPIED AND SPENDS MOST OF HIS TIME AT HOME, REQRITING ECCLESIASTES, THAI-STYLE, FOR OCCASIONAL VISITORS. SINCE HE KNOWS THE BURIAL PLACES OF MANY BODIES, HOWEVER, AND IS RESOURCEFUL AND FOXY, HE MIGHT YET MAKE A MOVE TO REGAIN HIS AUTHORITY.

6. CHAROEN, THEN, IS EMERGING AS KRIANGSAK'S SUCCESSOR BUT WILL PLAY THE ROLE MUCH DIFFERENTLY. THUS, ALSO PRESENT AT THE NOVEMBER 14 MEETING WAS A RELATIVELY JUNIOR MEMBER OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, WORAPHUT CHAIYANAM, THE AMERICAN DIVISION CHIEF, AND IT WAS WORAPHUT WHO DID MOST OF THE TALKING AND PLAYED THE LEADING ROLE ON THE THAI SIDE; THIS NEVER WOULD HAVE HAPPENED HAD KRIANGSAK BEEN IN THE CHAIR.

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7. CHATCHAI'S MOTIVES IN TAKING THE DRIVER'S SEAT ON MATTERS AFFECTING THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE ARE OF COURSE MIXED. HE ENJOYS THE SPOTLIGHT AND IS AMBITIOUS. TO APPEAR AT THE CENTER OF EVENTS IS BOTH PERSONALLY SATISFYING AND POLITICALLY USEFUL TO HIM. HE HOPES TO GAIN IN NATIONAL STATURE BY BECOMING IDENTIFIED AS THE MAN WHO LIQUIDATED THE U.S. COMBAT PRESENCE, AND THIS IS CONSISTENT WITH HIS LEADERSHIP OF THAT SCHOOL OF THOUGHT WHICH IS MOST PREPARED TO PAY A PRICE FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF RELATIONS WITH THE INDOCHINA STATES. HE ALSO IS SEEKING TO EXPLOIT HIS NEW ROLE IN THAI-U.S. MILITARY RELATIONS TO BESTOW BENEFITS ON HIS PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY IN KORAT. FINALLY, IT CANNOT BE RULED OUT THAT CHATCHAI IS, IN FACT, ALSO MOTIVATED BY PATRIOTIC IMPULSES AND SINCERELY BELIEVES THAT THAILAND'S NATIONAL INTEREST WILL BE SERVED ONLY IF HE CAN WREST FROM THE MILITARY CONTROL OF MATTERS INVOLVING THE U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE.

8. THIS IS NOT TO SUGGEST THAT THE MILITARY WILL SUPINELY DEFER TO CHATCHAI IN MATTERS TOUCHING THEIR VITAL INTERESTS, BUT THEY ARE DEFINING THEIR CONFIDENTIAL

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VITAL INTERESTS MORE NARROWLY. THERE IS SOME INDICATION THAT, DESPITE CHATCHAI'S CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE FUTURE USE OF U.S. BASES, HIS WISH TO CONVERT U.S. FACILITIES AT KORAT TO INDUSTRIAL USE HAS BEEN FRUSTRATED BY THE ROYAL THAI AIR FORCE, WHICH WANTS THE INSTALLATION AS AN AIR FORCE BASE.

9. UNLESS THE CURRENT TREND IS REVERSED, THE U.S. WILL FIND (INDEED ALREADY DOES FIND) THAT IT IS IN A NEW BALLGAME. THIS WILL BE APPARENT AS WE WORK OUT ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE RESIDUAL U.S. PRESENCE HERE. INSTEAD OF GETTING WHAT WE WANT THROUGH A SERIES OF HANDSHAKES, GENTLEMEN'S AGREEMENTS AND THE LIKE WITH THE THAI MILITARY AS IN THE PAST, WE WILL FIND OURSELVES NEGOTIATING MUCH MORE DETAILED WRITTEN AGREEMENTS WITH A MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS DETERMINED TO ASSERT THAI SOVEREIGNTY. WHILE THIS WILL UNQUESTIONABLY BE A NUISANCE, GIVEN MFA'S LACK OF ORGANIZATIONAL CAPABILITY, AND WE WILL FIND IT CONFINING, IT COULD RESULT IN ARRANGEMENTS THAT WILL PROVE MORE DURABLE UNDER CURRENT POLITICAL REALITIES IN THAILAND THAN ANYTHING THAT COULD BE WORKED OUT IN THE OLD WAY WITH THE MILITARY. IN ANY CASE, THIS LATTER OPTION IS NO LONGER AVAILABLE.

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